

HISTORY-
City ...

REF. PAM
HUNTINGTON
BEACH
HISTORY II

Community Info
Regular

PUBLIC LIBRARY

HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIF.

LOCAL HISTORY

H-B-1

The following material is made available through the courtesy of Mr. Bud Higgins, longtime resident of Huntington Beach. Mr. Higgins was a lifeguard for the city in his youth and later held the position of Fire Chief. He is currently writing a history of Huntington Beach and is considered to be an outstanding authority on the subject. Below is a condensation of an interview with Mr. Higgins which took place on April 8, 1973.

This valley, from the Costa Mesa bluffs out to the ocean, was all in the Santa Ana River Delta area. The Santa Ana River came down through Santa Ana Canyon and then spread out, surrounding three means on all sides and emptying into the ocean in three places. The first channel went into Newport Bay and then on down and out at the present opening at the harbor entrance. To the north of that was the Huntington Beach mesa, largest and tallest of the three with a top about 90 feet above sea level. The second opening into the ocean was at Warner Avenue, where the water from the swampland called Bolsa Chica Bay was emptied. There was a little mesa near there called the Bolsa Chica mesa, which included the present site of Marina High School. The third opening was at Anaheim landing, now the Seal Beach Net Depot. To the north of that was another mesa which was the city of Seal Beach.

The water from the Santa Ana River flowed year round and created a big swamp completely surrounding the Huntington Beach mesa. In that swamp there were willow trees, tules, and all kinds of growth, especially where the water came up out of the ground in artesian wells. When the river dropped down from flood stage the water would sink into the ground

and come out near the ocean in artesian wells which were called peat springs. Around these springs was a very luscious growth of material which rotted and made the rich, black peat ground. As this material accumulated it sunk and made peat bogs which were about 25 feet deep.

Back in those swamp days here there was all kinds of wildlife-- rabbits, foxes, linx, and deer. The ducks and geese came through here by the millions, too. They landed on the ocean and sometimes as far as you could see it would be black with ducks and geese. Then in the evening they would go over to feed in the swampland.

When I was a little kid a bunch of us used to go down to the swamp on Sundays. The water coming up out of the artesian wells made little lakes and all around was salt grass. The rabbits had made little burrows by running through the grass. The ducks and geese would come in and land on that water and then they would go off into the grass to feed. Then one of us would take off our clothes and run and dive into the pond and hide there. The ducks and geese had to go back to the pond to use the water to take off so they could fly back to the ocean. When they would come back we'd jump out of the pond and run after them, chasing them into the grass where the others were waiting. We'd catch them and bring them home alive.

Almost all of this area remained that way until about 1882 when settlers started clearing the ground to the north, between here and Westminster and made use of that peat ground for farming. This area didn't develop as easily as some others because these mesas were not along the regular way of travel. When Portola came through California in 1769, his party came by way of what is now San Juan Capistrano, up

through Tustin and Orange, across the river and headed on for the San Gabriel area. Father Serra was one of the expedition, and established missions along this route, known as the El Camino Real, which was further inland than the Huntington Beach area.

After the Mexicans gained their independence from Spain, the ranches were allocated. In this particular area we had Rancho Las Bolsas, Rancho Bolsa Chica ("las bolsas" meaning "pockets" and "bolsa chica" meaning "the pocket") and Rancho Las Alamitas. Rancho Las Bolsas was at one time 177,000 acres. It reached from the ocean by Newport Beach clear around Las Bolsas and up into the La Habra Heights area and back into San Bernadino County. These ranchos were granted to the Nieto family and their heirs by Mexican Governor Jose Figueros.

In 1852, Abel Stearns was wheeling and dealing in the area and had gained control of Rancho Las Alamitos from the Nieto family by loaning them money. When they defaulted he took the land away from them. In a couple of years they turned around and got it back from him, but within two or three more years he had gained control of Rancho Las Bolsas by loaning money to other Nieto heirs. A few years later he decided to sell the land off and so made a deal with a group of San Francisco businessmen headed by Alfred Robinson Trust, or the Los Angeles and San Bernadino Land Company. They established an office in Anaheim and proceeded to sell off this whole area in acreage.

The company appointed salesmen to live in a particular area and show around visitors or farmers who wanted to buy land. The customers could pick the piece of land they wanted and then offer a bid for it. The company's agent--in the case of the area north of Huntington Beach,

this was a Mr. Josh Pyle--would find out if the company would take that price, and if so, sold the land. I don't know exactly what the price of land was, but Mr. Stearns was to get one-eighth of the trust. He was given \$50,000, about \$1.50 for each acre that was sold. Before the company really sold a lot of land Mr. Stearns died, but the trust continued to operate.

A man from the east, Mr. D.E. Smeltzer, came out here and spotted the area north of town and decided he would try to raise celery. He rented 40 acres of the Snow Ranch, which was about where Golden West College is today. He wasn't a success the first year and went broke, but then he and his partner, a Mr. Curtis, went in with a company called the Earl Fruit Company. They formed a larger company, took on more land and really went into the farming of celery in a big way. They were a success. They brought in Chinese contract labor and set them up in labor camps. The crops were so good that by 1895 they were growing 6,000 acres of celery here on the north and east side of town. There was such a demand for cars to haul the celery that in around 1888 the Southern Pacific built a railroad up the waterfront from Newport Beach, and followed the section line out to what was called Smeltzer, where the Edinger Street crossing is now.

The Earl Fruit Company had by this point built a town named after D.E. Smeltzer. It was a pretty good-sized company-owned town. It had a hotel, a big dormitory for both the Chinese and white employees, and a barn for about a hundred horses. (By the way, the City of Huntington Beach bought that barn and the land a few years ago for a fire station site. They demolished the barn, which was the last remaining portion of the City of Smeltzer).

*
1895

The first year that the railroad went out there they hauled out 1600 carloads of celery. Now those cars were much smaller than the ones we have today, so 1600 carloads of celery is probably only about 800 of the present sized freight cars. But shortly after that they got into celery blight.

In the meantime, in order to get the water level down so that the land could be farmed (the Stearns Rancho Company sold the swampland first, which was the least valuable, and retained the Huntington Beach mesa for a few years), the farmers and other residents of the area voted bonds to set up a district to build what was called the Great Bolsa Ditch. They figured that by putting a big deep ditch in, they could put tile underground about four feet deep and run the water from underground into the ditch, bringing the water table down to where they could farm that real wet ground. In 1882 they started building the ditch. It began about a mile and a half due west of Marina High School on the edge of the bay. It was so wet out there that they had to use a dredger on a float to build the first portion of it. When they got to high enough ground they used clam shell digging equipment. The ditch followed Bolsa Chica Road and Edinger Strret up toward Westminster, and then went on over to and east of Bolsa Avenue. The farmers set up the tile plants to manufacture four inch tile. They cut ditches 40 feet apart and buried the tile in the ground so that the underground water would continue to run into the ditches and out into the ocean as the tide went out and keep the ground dry enough for farming.

On the very rich peat ground the farmers raised mostly truck crops. On land that was sort of marginal, it had some alkali which was removed

by tiling and flooding the land, the farmers raised subar beets and lima beans.

The last sale of the Stearns Rancho Company was 17,000 acres of the Huntington Beach mesa to Col. Bob Northam in 1896. Col. Northam moved a house from Westminster and it is up on top of a hill out on Mansion and Main Streets, just east of Huntington Beach High School. He proceeded to farm this whole upper mesa in barley and oats for feed grains that he sold to the surrounding ranchoers.

The same year Mr. W.T. Newland moved in over on Adams Street and Beach Boulevard on the edge of the mesa. He built a home there and bought land in the valley. Mr. Newland was interested in farming and so developed a root cutter which was strong enough to take out the willow trees on his land. His invention made it possible for him to clear land which was difficult to do so before and begin farming. Mr. Newland saw the need for a town down here and especially for a school. His children in order to go to school had to go to and follow the railroad track out to Warner Avenue, go east on Warner Avenue and then south again to get down to the nearest school, which was the Fountain Valley School still located at the corner of Talbert and Bushard. In 1896, Mr. Newland talked a Santa Ana newspaperman into coming down and touring the mesa and then writing an article about what a fine place this would be for a city.

But it wasn't until about 1901 that Phil Stanton, who later subdivided Bay City, now called Seal Beach, became interested in the project and contacted Mr. Newland. They formed a company called the West Coast Land Company and bought 40 acres of land from Col. Northam of what is now the downtown area of Huntington Beach. They filed a subdivision

map in 1901 and proceeded to get to work to develop a town which they named Pacific City. ~~They~~ They laid out the business district and built a pier and a pavilion. But within a year the West Coast Land Company found out it didn't have enough money to build a city and sold out to a group of Los Angeles and San Francisco businessmen. They changed the name of the company to the Huntington Beach Company and the name of the town to Huntington Beach in honor of Henry Huntington, one of the original stockholders in the West Coast Land Company who was pushing his railroad down this way.

So in 1904 the real layout of Huntington Beach came out. The Huntington Beach Company put in the electric plant, the telephone system, the water system, a city dump, a cemetery, and 20 miles of curbs and gutters. They also planted thousands of trees and built a three-story hotel on the ocean front. After five years the land still wasn't selling very well, so the city was incorporated (in 1909) to take over some of the public works duties.

Many of the older houses in the town lost section were built by the Huntington Beach Company. From the time the company was organized until about 1916, they were engaged in a continuous project of selling parcels of land, lots, and building and selling houses. There were other companies building in the area, too. One of the biggest was Pacific Systems Homes. They built all redwood homes that are easy to recognize by the big wide front porch built around them. And of course there were individual builders that built homes for people.

During this period Huntington Beach was advertised all over Southern California as a resort town. When Henry Huntington brought his electric cars in, lots of visitors came down from the Los Angeles area--you could

get on a train and come right to Huntington Beach. Tourist trains with whole strings of cars would come down on Sundays and then wait until late afternoon when they all went back. There were also a lot of people who owned little cottages here who came down for the summer from inland towns. But the city wasn't expanding like the developers had hoped it would and remained pretty much a little seaside village. By 1918 the Huntington Beach Company was almost broke and had to hold a one day auction to get enough money to keep from going bankrupt. Things remained that way until 1920.

In 1920 an engineer from the Standard Oil Company thought he saw the possibility of oil on this mesa. He convinced the company to drill a well and the Huntington Beach oil boom began. The first areas to be drilled was around Garfield and Goldenwest Streets. There were a lot of people there with small farms of 5, 10, or 20 acres who grew fruit trees or grapes and raised a few cows. They were very poor people, just trying to make a living on these small farms. When that oil boom hit they became millionaires overnight. West of Bolsa Chica Road, two encyclopedia salesmen had purchased 10 acres of land and divided it up into 25 square foot parcels. There were no lots or streets, just these small parcels. The salesmen gave the parcels away with a set of encyclopedias to try and get people to buy the sets. It was only about 1 1/2 to 2 years after the people got them that oil was discovered. Tom Talbert traveled all over the United States to get a hold of these people and get them to lease their land to the West American Oil Company. All the people upon the mesa who had land that turned into oil fields became very wealthy people.

The oil drilling remained in that outlying area until 1927--for six years they kept it out of the town lot section. Then in 1927 they figured

there was oil in the town lot section. So they started in at 23rd Street and came all the way down to 7th Street. They drilled up the whole town lot section. By this time the city was pretty well built up from 1st Street to 23 Street--it was all in nice homes and apartments. But of course when the oil boom hit they just wiped out many of the houses and truned the land into oil fields. Then in 1933 there was another boom when the Whipstock was invented and companies began drilling under the ocean.

Over a period of years, Standard Oil Company traded stock in their company for Huntington Beach Company stock. Two heirs of a Mr. Vicker, one of the original stockholders in the Huntington Beach Company still hold stock in the company, but it is now controlled and really owned by Standard Oil.

For a long time Huntington Beach was known for its oil production and agriculture. The farming area surrounding Huntington Beach was the most expensive land in Orange County. It was good feed land and could produce good paying crops. Much of the peat land was continually planted with truck crops and the cheaper, marginal land out around where the Douglass Plant is now, was planted in sugar beets and in lima beans.

When the tremendous growth of Orange County took place it started where land was cheap. The land around Anaheim and Garden Grove was covered with river bed sand. While land sold here for \$5,000 an acre, you could buy land in Garden Grove for \$2,000 an acre. During this first period of growth in Orange County, from 1952-1959, people thought that this area wouldn't grow because the land was too expensive. But as land in the inland areas became more valuable--land that had sold for \$2,000 an acre near Disneyland went up to \$17,000 an acre--the farmers here were encouraged to sell out. Some of the first farmers in the Wintersburg and Smeltzer area that left didn't really sell out, but traded instead. They

traded 1 acre of Huntington Beach land for 8 acres of land in the Imperial Valley or Oxnard. By 1962 the value of land in both places had gone up and trade had become 4 to 1.

The first sales of farming land in the Huntington Beach area were right across the street from Marina High School, to the south. The Shields Company, which had already developed in Garden Grove, bought a piece of land a whole mile long and a half-mile wide from Edinger Street to Heil and from Springdale to Bolsa Chica Road. That was the first subdivision since the downtown area was established years earlier. All the farmers in that area knew what was coming and asked to be annexed to Huntington Beach. Within a period of about two years, Huntington Beach annexed 25 square miles of surrounding area. The farmers down in the Fountain Valley area however, didn't want growth. So they got together and formed the City of Fountain Valley and didn't allow any subdivisions for the first several years. But as the price of land went up they changed their minds, sold out, and moved to Imperial Valley and other places.

It was 1959 when the building boom really started in Huntington Beach and it began on the cheapest land then spread around and into the valley down here. Land values that started here at \$5,000 an acre gradually increased over the years so that now the value is over \$30,000 an acre. Since the first subdivision there has been continuous building here.

Recently the Historical Society of Huntington Beach was formed, and they've been meeting at Goldenwest College. They've been dealing with Signal Oil Company, which bought the Newland property at Beach Boulevard and Adams to develop into a big business center. The Historical Society wants to save the Newland house from being destroyed. Originally it looked like the house was going to be moved from there down the hill. But

now it looks like Signal Oil is going to leave the house where it is and give the house and some land surrounding it to the Historical Society.

The Orange County Archeological Society wants to do some digging on that property, because that was one of the sites in this area where Indians lived. The city paid the archeological society to do a survey in Huntington Beach, and they found all of the sites where Indians had lived and where burial grounds were located around the edge of the Huntington Beach mesa and the Bolsa Chica mesa.